

Ibsen's Self-Reflexivity in 'A Doll's House' and 'The Masterbuilder'

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[Deer is an American drama critic, editor, and educator whose works include *Ibsen: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1965). In the following excerpt, he asserts that *A Doll's House* shows a shift in Ibsen's artistic intentions.]

Despite the fact that a number of Ibsen's protagonists are artists or surrogate artist figures, little consideration has been given to his work as art about art, or, more specifically, drama about drama. This neglect may result partly from the fact that Ibsen is generally considered a kind of social problem writer, someone who is quintessentially concerned, at least in his plays, with the world, not with his own artistic problems. His status as the "father of modern drama," meaning the creator of realistic drama, promotes the same "blindness" to the possibility that he could be writing plays both about their own genesis and about the world.

I want to argue that such a paradox, both an inward and an outward focus, is precisely one of Ibsen's main concerns and achievements. His best plays are both about themselves and about the world, and perhaps most interestingly, about their own struggle to achieve that paradoxical state....

For those of us who have seen performances of *A Doll's House* by Claire Bloom or Jane Fonda on stage, screen or television in the last decade, there is little difficulty in understanding Ibsen's reputation as a writer of social problem plays. Most people still see the play as one about a heroic young woman's victorious struggle for freedom from repressive social conventions. Some, however, like Hermann Weigand in the twenties, see Nora as a deceptive, selfish, intriguing young woman bent only on having her own way. These critics believe Ibsen is satirizing and debunking her rather than, as the other critics believe, holding her up as virtue incarnate.

Whichever interpretation you favor, the play comes out to be about social problems, about the problems of the individual's responsibility to society and conversely, of society's responsibility to the individual. When the play first came out conventional audiences favored emphasizing the individual's responsibility to society. More liberal audiences since have emphasized the play's concern with society's responsibility to the individual. Although the liberal view has been dominant for years now, some such alignment still persists.

The problem from the point of view of my subject is not then one of showing Ibsen's concern with relating *A Doll's House* to society. That is obvious. What is more difficult is to show that the play is also about playing, that it is, in other words, a kind of self-conscious drama about drama itself. The illusion of objective realism Ibsen achieved with the play, its apparent photographic objectivity, seems to most people to deny the possibility of the kind of self-conscious subjectivity I am looking for in the play. Yet there is an almost obvious sense in which the play is about characters playing roles, clearly pretending, performing for others. This is most obvious with Nora herself. It is also perhaps one of the main reasons those in the Weigand camp see her as an intriguer and plotter rather than as the

virtuous heroine for whom she is more often taken. From the beginning of the play she engages in little intrigues, pretending to Torvald she has been obeying him about not eating macaroons, when we just saw her eat some before he entered the room, performing like a squirrel for him to get him to give her some money so, as we later learn, she can engage in her greatest intrigue of all, the plot to cover up the loan she has been paying off in this way to Krogstad for years. Later when Krogstad threatens to write her husband not only about the loan but about her having forged her dead father's signature to get it, she gives a frenzied, desperate performance, a literal performance, dancing a tarantella at a party upstairs, to try to keep Torvald from going back to their apartment where he will pick up the mail with Krogstad's letter.

Performance, role-playing, is thus for the central figure in the play a necessary form of action, perhaps the main form her struggles take. But there is also another sense in which Ibsen's subject is drama itself. Most of the characters are conceived of as playing roles drawn from the kinds of Danish and French romantic melodramas from which Ibsen learned his craft. As Raymond Williams points out, there is "the innocent child-like woman, involved in a desperate deception, the heavy insensitive husband; the faithful friend." "Similarly," Williams continues, "the main situations of the play are typical of the intrigue drama: the guilty secret, sealed lips, the complication of situations around Krogstad's letter ... Krogstad at the children's party ... the villain against a background of tranquility...." For Williams all of this is an indication of the play's weaknesses: "None of this is at all new," he says, "and it is the major part of the play."

His view would be true if the play were not self-conscious, that is, if it were not about the limitations of playing such roles in life as well as in drama. As I see the play, it is centrally about Nora's discovery of how limited her romantic role-playing has been, how it was not only imposed on her by society, but willingly accepted by her. I believe in fact that the main reason she is taken by one group as the embodiment of modern heroism and by another as villainy personified is that Ibsen shows us that each of those views is a fragment of the truth. Both constitute partial views of Nora. She did save her husband's life, she is willing to commit suicide like some Isolde to save her husband and family from ruin, but she also did naively forge her father's signature on a loan, and innocently expects Torvald to act like a storybook lover who takes all her shame on himself. She sees herself as the romantic heroine of the types of plays from which Ibsen learned his craft, the Danish historical romances and the French melodramas he imitated and directed. The liberal perspective supports her view. However, a shift to a more conservative perspective, one that emphasizes her responsibility to her husband, children, and society, can easily emphasize her similarity to the intriguing, villainous women of the French melodramas. From such a perspective, she lies, postures and intrigues about everything, and when found out, runs off, dropping all her responsibilities. Both these views of Nora, as the romantic heroine or the intriguing villain, are extremely limited, melodramatic views. As she is beginning to discover by the end of the play, by having accepted either of such limited views of herself, or having allowed society to impose one on her, she has contributed to her own frustration as a person who is trying to express more of herself than society allows. By showing us one melodramatic view of Nora, then the opposite melodramatic view, Ibsen is pointing out both the limitations of melodramatic ways of seeing and of writing.

We can see this in Ibsen's treatment of situations drawn from the popular Scribean intrigues he knew so well. The whole letter situation, for example, is given a new twist, not accepted in its mechanical conventional form as Williams seems to think. Nora does everything to try to divert Torvald's attention

from the letter box. When he finally gets Krogstad's first letter and reads it, he acts as a character would in *Scribe*. The world turns in *Scribe*'s plays on glasses of water, handkerchiefs and letters. Everything stops with them. The world is saved. The lovers are united. Virtue triumphs. The play ends. Nurtured by society on such forms of expression, Torvald reacts appropriately. He feels his life has been ruined by his stupid wife, just when he has become an important bank manager. In retribution, he in effect stops Nora from functioning. He tells her she can no longer be a real wife or mother to their children, that she will corrupt them as she is corrupted. Since the only roles society has allowed her have been those of child, lover, wife and mother, the only two roles she has left by which to express herself are those of wife and mother. Now Torvald has taken those away from her.

True, he returns them a few minutes later when Krogstad's second letter comes. Since Krogstad has returned the incriminating loan papers, Torvald is no longer in danger. He would like to forget the whole thing, to get back to where he and Nora were before he castigated her as innately corrupt. As he sees it, he is generously returning her to her status as wife and mother. She, however, sees the sequence of events somewhat differently. She sees how limited and arbitrary have been the roles society has assigned her and she has accepted.

Nora now sees the need to find new ways of relating to society. She has also seen the possibility of finding new ways. She has seen her friend Christine become a widow, a working woman surviving on her own, a woman who goes into an unmarried, permanent relationship with a man, the choice which also makes the man, Krogstad, see that he is not doomed to isolation and to the intrigues he felt conventional society had forced on him. Just as Nora now sees the need and the possibility of finding new ways of relating to society, so does Ibsen as a writer of a new kind of drama. He was with *A Doll's House* creating the realistic drama that was to make him world famous. This new kind of drama constituted his attack on the conventional romantic and intrigue drama and vision he had inherited. It was the first step among several important ones he would take in experimenting with new, more contemporary possibilities for drama.

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